TL2491

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

NEWS

DATE: August 28, 1985

FROM: Robert Wonderly

O - 202/659-6700
H - 703/979-3293

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CARDINAL VOICES SUPPORT
FOR EAST TIMOR CATHOLICS

WASHINGTON--Support for the "struggle to preserve and enhance the dignity of life" of Catholics in East Timor has been expressed by John Cardinal O'Connor of New York, on behalf of the United States Catholic Conference.

In a letter to Msgr. Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, Apostolic Administrator of Dili, East Timor, Cardinal O'Connor also assured his prayers for "the right of your people to live in peace and freedom."

The USCC is the public policy agency of Catholic bishops of the United States. Cardinal O'Connor is chairman of the USCC Social Development and World Peace committee.

The New York prelate addressed the letter to Monsignor Belo in June. Its content is being released now to coincide with Monsignor Belo's return to Dili from an extended European visit during which he explored ways to ease tension between the Timorese and Indonesian forces of occupation.

Among places Monsignor Belo visited in Europe was the Vatican, where he was received in private audience by Pope John Paul II.

/more

East Timor was invaded and occupied by Indonesian military forces in 1975 when Portugal withdrew its administration. The largely Catholic population of East Timor, estimated at about 650,000 in 1975, has been decimated by military action, disease, and malnutrition.

The United States government, which supplies Indonesia with most of its military equipment, has stated it acknowledges Indonesia's de facto rule over East Timor, while admitting that a valid act of self-determination by the Timorese has not taken place. Indonesia still lacks the approval of the United Nations for its actions in East Timor.

The text of Cardinal O'Connor's letter to Monsignor Belo follows:

Last summer, your predecessor, Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopez, came to see me in New York. Over breakfast he recounted vividly the tribulations of the Church in East Timor. I promised him that we would try to provide you with as much support and encouragement as possible.

Since then I have been kept abreast of developments in East Timor by the staff of the Office of International Justice and Peace of this Conference. And we are not your only friends in the United States. You are probably aware of the interest of many members of the U.S. Congress and their repeated public expressions of support addressed to the Executive Branch of the United States government.

In Europe too, interest and awareness has been stimulated by the statements and reports of various Catholic justice and peace commissions. Later this month, Amnesty International will release an exclusive and well documented report on the situation in East Timor.

We support the efforts being made in many quarters to encourage greater access to East Timor by journalists and human rights organizations. And we hope that the efforts of our Catholic Relief Services have contributed in some measure to the alleviation of the sufferings being endured by your people.

/more

I hope that following your receipt of this letter, we can arrange to be in regular communication and that you will not hesitate to write to me with suggestions of ways in which we can be helpful.

Above all I want you to be assured of our constant prayers that God will strengthen you and the Church in East Timor in your struggle to preserve and enhance the dignity of life and the right of your people to live in peace and freedom.

# # #

X,A,EDP